

The Decline of Individualism

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IN HER 1966 lecture, Dr. Dorothy B. Nyswander, professor emeritus of health education at the University of California School of Public Health, Berkeley, stated that public health education is moving toward an enlarged conception of itself, toward a concern with nothing less than how to promote the welfare of man and the kind of society in which he can flourish. Public health educators are not the only ones who will be doing this, for some of us in other professions share this concern.

My main focus here is on the apparent decline of individualism in our society. How does today's society discourage individuals from becoming autonomous persons? In attempting to answer this question, I attach great importance to the downgrading of the concepts and theories which enable us to accent the individual person in our work, particularly about how the whole person gets lost among the various health professions and in institutions in which he must play different roles.

Neglect of the Whole Person

Professional people tend to focus on a person's particular symptom or problem without regard to the possible implications of their actions for other areas of functioning in that person. In behavior therapy in psychology, for example, the concern is to change a particular

symptom or pattern of behavior by focusing on just that without attention to the meaning of that symptom in the whole functioning of the patient.

There are few people, except possibly mothers of preadolescent youngsters, who are really concerned about the person as a whole—who connect what is done by one specialist with what is done by another and interpret those actions according to their knowledge of the whole person. Once I mentioned this to a German scholar and he said, "Oh yes, there was a chap in Germany who wrote a book about this which he called the Motherless Society."

Some efforts have been made to develop a specialist in the whole person; for example, a child development specialist who would do the things a teacher does not have time to do. Professional structures are difficult to change, however, because each professional has a great deal of interest vested in his work and there is no one to direct attention to the whole person by organizing the various specialities.

Paralleling what is happening in practice is the trend in science toward increasing division of scientific activities into specialized inquiry. I think we see this both in the way the search for knowledge is organized and in the current trends in theory making itself. I think the abandonment of the concept of soul helped to pave the way for the psychological fragmentation of the person and that the growth of professional impersonality goes along with the fragmentation that has occurred in psychological science.

For a time it seemed that the concept of personality would serve to refer to the wholeness

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and the uniqueness of the person, but recently in departments of psychology the term "personality" has come to be regarded by graduate students as almost as "spooky" as the concept of soul.

Psychoanalysis. This trend is connected with declining interest in psychoanalysis. In the late 1940's, after the war, the young people and the students, whose counterparts today are concerned with the newest thing in drugs, the newest thing in encounter groups, or with various swinging styles of life, were asking themselves, "Where can I find an inexpensive analyst?" This was the orientation of those times. Now interest in analysis as a part of culture has almost disappeared, and this makes an interesting and a rather disturbing story.

Psychoanalysts are still writing papers that are comparable, often unfavorably, with some written in the twenties. They have neglected to learn how to do psychological research. They have tied themselves to medicine and lost what could have been gained by alliance with the humanistic spirit to be found in universities (or at least that which used to be found in universities). Moreover, psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrists and psychologists also tend to focus on the particular symptom or the particular kind of dysfunction without paying any more attention to the whole person than do other practitioners.

I have been teaching for some years in the psychology department at Stanford—teaching, of course, in personality. There, as in almost all prominent departments today, the dominant interest in research and in teaching is related to learning theory, and the psychology of personality is struggling to survive. Almost all students I see have already been so well versed in learning theory that the quarter is almost over before I can sense that they are tuning in, as they might say, on what I am trying to talk about.

Something else has been most interesting to me. Each year, after that lecture course, a few students want to read further in the literature of psychoanalysis—classical and revisionist. Most of these students, in recent years, have been Catholics who transferred from eastern Catholic institutions. It occurred to me that whereas the majority of the students are willing to go

along with behavioristic psychology and what it implies, the Catholic students apparently are sufficiently familiar with inner conflict so that psychoanalysis is still meaningful to them. In fact, I imagine that in the years ahead Catholic institutions may be one place in which Freudian ideas are kept alive; that is, until curiosity about people drives academic psychologists once again to take these ideas seriously.

Some signs of a counter trend are apparent, however. Analytic theories are being presented in departments other than psychology. Owing, I think, largely to the works of Erikson (1), historians are becoming interested in psychoanalytic or personality theories as an approach to understanding history. Similarly, whereas "The Authoritarian Personality" (2) is rarely taught in departments of psychology, it is taught in departments of political science. We could thus suggest to students that if they want to study personality they would be better off to study in a department such as political science, where at least some people are discussing personality, than in a psychology department.

Changes in science. Considering the vicissitudes of personality theory, we may ask what causes what? Practice is certainly based to a considerable extent on the concept and theories that we get from science. If a person is fragmented in all of our theories about people, then naturally this may readily become the basis for fragmented practice. Or, if in theory the person disappears into a collective process or into a social structure, then practice is likely to be designed to affect those structures and processes without particular attention to the individual. The question is, how has science come to view things in this fashion?

My suggestion is that science itself has been influenced by the same social and historical processes in the larger society which have influenced professional practice. Here it must be recognized that the individual is in fact disappearing in our society in the sense that it is becoming increasingly difficult for a person to act as an individual.

This is as true of the university as of various other organizations. It has to do, I think, with the fact that the models of business and industry and the military have been largely adopted by the university itself. There is a kind of tri-

umph of efficiency and rationality which is difficult to change because this is the way individual careers are defined, and it is worth a great deal to a man to be able to do what will in fact advance his career.

Administrators of universities, like administrators everywhere, are caught in the demands of their roles and are rarely able to make a personal imprint on their job. Usually, they are content if they can do well precisely what the role demands.

To illustrate that trends in society are responsible for changes in science, I think I need only mention the textbook business. It is commonly said that all textbooks in elementary psychology are somewhat similar, and I think this is true. Recently, I read a bit from a newly revised elementary textbook in psychology. I read a chapter on personality and behavior change. As I expected, the accent in this chapter was on behavior therapy and on cognitive dissonance.

I know that the author of that chapter is not a devotee of behavior therapy or of cognitive dissonance, and I am quite sure that he accented these topics because a market survey had suggested that this is what teachers of elementary psychology are interested in today. The author wrote in such a way that, although he mentioned various kinds of psychotherapy, the only material he gave that students are likely to remember was a case study of someone who had changed under the impact of behavior therapy. And, whereas he mentioned several theories of attitude change, he devoted several pages to the cognitive dissonance theory.

The fact is that what the author of this chapter wrote, and what students will thus have a chance to learn, has little to do with what the author really thinks or even with what psychology is really about. It has to do, rather, with a conception of what is the consensus today as to what teachers think they ought to teach. Another aspect is that at the end of every chapter in this book there were research reports. Interestingly, none of these reports was dated earlier than 1964. It is necessary to revise often to keep an elementary text alive, and, to make the revision apparent, recent works must be cited. Thus, no student of elementary psychology will know anything that happened in psychology more than 5 years ago. This, I believe, is an ex-

ample of how larger social processes may largely determine what should be the most individualistic intellectual work of a scholar.

Demands of production and consumption. According to Karl Marx, people are shaped or processed by the demands of productive operations. For example, we segregate children by age, sex, intelligence, and personality in classrooms so that each group can be taught by particular teaching techniques and so that few particular demands are made on the teacher to adjust the teaching to the child. All children in each group are presumably alike, thus allowing a kind of efficiency in teaching and in the organization of work. We define roles more and more precisely and insist that individuals do more and more precisely just what those roles require. Never mind whether the work gives a person a chance to express himself.

Various writers, particularly Marcuse in his "One Dimensional Man" (3), are now pointing out that the same thing is happening in consumption. Just as the demands of production tend to shape us, so do the demands of consumption or of keeping the commercial enterprise going. Thus, not only our work but our play is invaded by the demands of our technological society.

Ways of consuming are guided in the interest of the market and of keeping the corporation going. There is little need for an individual to decide what he will consume because this is made clear for him in the form of advertising and in the movies. In fact, these ways of consuming are sufficiently gratifying so that we easily go along with them. However, this process is damaging to the individual. He is freed from the necessity of having to make decisions and he is momentarily satisfied, but I believe his gratification is not fundamental.

Even the sex lives of people are open to this kind of regulation and administration. It started, of course, with the "Kinsey Report" when everyone could be guided by the knowledge of what everyone else did and what was therefore approved in our society.

New Social Phenomena

Against the foregoing background, I wish to discuss the new social phenomena—the devaluation of privacy, the new sexuality, the new

“encounter” groups, and the new anti-intellectualism. These phenomena have to be understood as partly a reaction against the increasing domination of our lives by technology, but at the same time as a kind of identification with this technology. My main point is that maybe these phenomena would not be possible if the people involved knew about or believed in an adequate psychology of the person.

Devaluation of privacy. Privacy, and to some extent solitude, is vital for the development of personality. It is a way to establish the boundaries between one's self and the rest of the world. Privacy or the experience of solitude is essential to sustain the individual against the society. It establishes that, “Here am I as an individual, and there is the society.”

Of course, technological society pays no attention to privacy. In fact, it is extremely difficult to maintain privacy today. There are numerous files on each of us, and they start accumulating when we are in elementary school. For instance, anyone could probably obtain copies of the tests that Dr. Nyswander and I took when we were in school, and numerous people have had access to such tests. Another example is credit ratings—for about \$50 one can get a credit rating on almost anyone, a rating based on interviews with his neighbors and on a careful study of the garbage pails that come from his house.

We are exposed to all kinds of intrusion and this, of course, is a basis for all kinds of external control. Under these conditions, it is peculiar that today's avant-garde is so insistent on “total honesty” and “openness.” It is almost as if there were a kind of identification with those processes which downgrade the very concept of privacy.

I can understand a kind of psychological revolt against the “system” which is seen as a source of alienation and loneliness and, therefore, a heavy accent on getting together with other “alienated” people and being open with them. But have they considered the complexity of what is involved in this? Of course, a person is fundamentally a social being, and we all interact with other people, but it certainly makes a difference how the social relations are mediated in the person.

It is destructive to be merged with a group

and unable to think of one's self as apart from the group. In fact, the Nazis deliberately used the device of making people always think of themselves as members of groups as a way to destroy individual personality. There is a kind of necessity for group-belonging which is destructive of individuality. It is something entirely different to achieve a genuine intimacy with other people based upon a structure of personality in one's self and an appreciation of the complexity of the other person. However, this kind of intimacy takes time. One has to know the other person and be sensitive to one's self in order to develop genuine intimacy with another person. It cannot be done right away, as seems to be assumed by many approaches to therapy and group relations today.

The new sexuality. The sexuality I am talking about is the apparent liberality or ease of access to be found among highly educated and affluent people. I refer to wife-swapping and the extreme tolerance of what can be shown in the movies and on the newsstands. This has become very much a part of our culture. Its ideology is set forth in popular magazines. It is a part of what Henry (4) described as the “adult fun culture,” and it is in keeping with all kinds of commercial interests. Prescriptions with respect to how we are to behave in this realm can easily be picked up from the movies and from conversations, and it is, I think, quite clear that many people gauge what to do in this area by what they feel to be a consensus as to what is permissible in our society.

Is this really sexuality? It is not one's own sexuality. It is a set of functions or practices taken out of the context in which such practices normally belong. It is mere behavior, the meaning of which is not determined by one's self, not determined by its place in a complex set of processes going on in the person, but by external determinants of this particular behavior pattern. I cannot see how it can be other than meaningless.

How can educated and intelligent people participate in such activities? What is the basis for their rationalizations? I can understand how it is possible for a person who has been brought up puritanically to see the personality as made up of two things—puritanical standards and pure impulse. If such persons are

determined to get rid of their puritanical standards, they can only turn to expressing their impulses as freely as possible. They fail to see sexual behavior as integral with the personality or to understand that, fundamentally, the great satisfaction is attained from sexual behavior when it is a means for expressing a variety of complicated feelings and motives. In my view, the kinds of behavior which are common today are sustained and can be sustained because people have no conception of the place of such actions in the normal personality. They have not learned this in school or elsewhere.

Much of the same holds true for certain aspects of drug abuse—the notion that by means of drugs one can get quick release of feeling or a quick introduction to one's feelings that he has known nothing about before and that somehow this will be enormously beneficial.

What is lacking is a theory to explain how this new kind of openness to experience is not the same thing as experience—that the experience has still to be had, and that when an experience is had it still has to be integrated into the personality if it is going to make a difference in a person's life.

Group practices. A word about group practices—in the new sensitivity training, the encounter-groups, and the like. I know that some good things happen in groups, and I know people who have had good experiences in them, but I also think that there are some situations in which they approach charlatanism and lead to a parody of genuine human relations.

I have long been skeptical of sensitivity training because I have known instances in which the whole operation was carried out by people who knew some formula about group processes but who had no sensitivity to individuals. Thus individual persons could suffer while apparently the group as a whole was doing very well.

There seems to be a broad conviction that any kind of circumstance or situation that can release emotion rapidly is good for us or that having any experience in a group will somehow be a good thing. I think this is not necessarily so. Certainly, just expressing emotion or being primitive on a particular occasion is by no means the same as being liberated emotionally. The notion that pure emotionality is the answer to the over-accent on cognitive processes seems

quite wrong to me. To really sustain whatever is gained from some emotional experience, it must be thought about and talked about. In other words, it must be integrated with some kind of intellectual process if it is to be sustained.

Anti-intellectualism. In discussing anti-intellectualism, I refer, for example, to those young people who feel excluded from the group the moment an effort is made to have a rational discussion. I encounter young people, and some middle-aged people, who feel that intellectual distinctions are wrong and antidemocratic and will lead to social distinctions or exclusions.

Probably what is happening here is some kind of revolt against the emotional starvation that most people get in school. But surely the answer to the segregation of cognitive processes from the rest of the personality is not segregation of emotional processes from the rest of the personality. The answer, I think, must be new efforts to integrate the two so that we can be passionate about intellectual ideas and somewhat intellectual or at least rational about emotional experiences.

Theory About the Whole Person

The neglect of the whole person is due mainly to vast and possibly irreversible processes in society. But, if we ask what can be done, I do not see how we can make progress without being guided by some theory of how the individual develops in interaction with society. Of course, here I am assuming that the individual and his development is the supreme value in our society.

We must have a theory about the whole person, including the most essential ideas from psychoanalysis—the idea of the dynamic unconscious and the idea that the same behavior can have a diversity of meanings. I believe we are not far from having such a theory.

Considering what psychologists such as Erikson (1), Loevinger (5), White (6), Klein (7), and others have added to classic Freudian theories and what psychologists such as Maslow (8), Fromm (9), and Allport (10) have added by way of stressing the organismic requirement, we are not too far from having the right kind of theory.

Also, this theory must be a social one. It must deal with the ways in which personality devel-

ops in interaction with society. It will not do to just have a theory of "socialization" as the sociologists define it. We must see that it makes a great deal of difference whether the social stimuli are incorporated into the super-ego or whether they are incorporated into the personality on the basis of the good judgments that take place in the ego itself.

Suppose we have such a theory. The question then is how to teach, disseminate, and use it as a basis for practice. It will not do just to exhort people, and I do not know of any powers-that-be that can be appealed to in the interest of bringing about the teaching of this kind of psychological and social theory.

One thing that we can do is to take advantage of the counter forces that develop somewhat outside of the major systems, as in a school of public health that teaches psychological and sociological theories that are no longer taught in departments of psychology and sociology because they are unfashionable. Such theories are not excluded in schools of public health because these schools are concerned with problems, and they do not select the particular departments of the university from which the theories or ideas are to come.

As I suggested earlier, one can learn psychology today in schools of social welfare, in political science, and in the medical school, and one can learn theories that are not taught in the psychology department itself. This suggests that there are counter forces at work, and when something is suppressed on one front, it emerges on some other front. We can lend our support to those developments when they occur.

Research

Then, we can deliberately try to set up counter forces. We could deliberately try to organize research around problems and around people rather than around variables, disciplines, or factors. This is what my colleagues and I have tried to do in the Institute for the Study of Human Problems at Stanford (11), and what we are trying to do in the new Wright Institute in Berkeley. Our theory is that if you attack real problems you are bound to be multidisciplinary because problems are not sorted out in accord with conceptions of separate scientific disciplines. They are just there. Whatever

theories and ideas are available must be brought to bear on the problems, and the kind of theory that can help to deal with genuine problems must be comprehensive and holistic.

If we could get research organized in this way, then teaching would follow because teaching does follow research. But, it is futile to try to get people to devote more time to teaching instead of to research. If, however, they can be persuaded to do research that requires them to be generalists, then their teaching would be generalized. If this happens, they will have to turn to the kind of theory that I have been advocating.

More than that, I think we can deliberately try to humanize what we do in the universities and in our practical work by deliberately bringing together what has been separated in science and in practice—research from action, action from teaching, and teaching from research.

Recently, some students and I tried to do this, with some success, at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. I had a class in which the graduate students studied each other. This not only proved to be an economical way to do research on students, but the researchers learned a lot about themselves, and the people who were interviewed were asked questions that led them to think about things that they hadn't thought about before. The interviewed students also discovered that some of their complaints that they hadn't yet had a chance to talk about were in fact widely shared.

In other words, an inquiry of this kind has an impact upon the individuals inquired into and upon the whole institution in which they live. At the Theological Union the students who were made aware of the discrepancies between the way things were and the way things might be became activists and organized themselves in the interest of actually bringing about changes in their institution.

This illustrates that the difference between the researcher and the "subject" need not be very broad, that both learn as a result of the interaction, and that this kind of activity can affect the whole institution in which it is carried on. It could be argued that very little change occurs in institutions from acquiring certain facts and then undertaking to apply them, and that the way change does occur is through the actual

starting of a process which can then be guided to some extent.

I would mention also the possibility of defining and institutionalizing new kinds of social roles, but this is very difficult. Many students would like to be generalists, but they ask themselves, "What would this do to my career?" We are hard put to give them a good answer.

It recently occurred to me that we might try to reconstruct and lend prestige to the role of the clergyman. He is still in an excellent position to practice community psychology, and if we can offer the right kind of training and give his role the kind of prestige that it might have, this would be a way to proceed with actions that really accent the person.

Conclusions

We cannot turn the clock back. There is no way to halt our advancing technology. We can't just drop out and admit defeat—we might miss some excitement if we do—and besides there is no place to go. We can only be ourselves, and find that we are being human when we try to understand what is happening to us, and to stand in opposition to it if we don't like it. Without underestimating the power of technological trends, there are some potent forces on our side. The fact remains that man does not really want to be dehumanized, as we see in each new generation of students who bring the same curiosity and hopefulness and idealism that the last generation brought.

Life itself is somehow on the side of countering the deadening hand of technology. This is the sort of thing that Fromm (9) has dramatized in his recent writings—the love of life on the one side and the love of death on the other. Fundamentally, the problem that I have wrestled with is the same as an earlier one in which we tried to find some conclusion to our work on "The Authoritarian Personality" (2). There the concern was prejudice. I suggested

that although the prejudiced are better rewarded in our society in a material way, the unprejudiced are fundamentally happier, even though they have to suffer considerable conscious guilt feelings because they are so often in opposition to the prevailing way. Given this promise of happiness, we need not suppose that appeal to emotion belongs to those who strive in the direction of fascism while democratic propaganda must limit itself to reason and restraint. If fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources of fascism, eros belongs mainly to democracy.

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Tearsheet Requests

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